

Discovering God on Angel Island

In the fall of 1916, my grandmother, Wong Shee Fong, boarded the S.S. *Tenyo Maru* and set sail for America, having been separated from her husband for over five years. Alone and in her early 20s, she was eager to leave a fractured and struggling China, a country left in the hands of competing warlords after the failed monarchy of self-proclaimed emperor Yuan Shikai. Furthermore, she was fleeing the tyranny of a harsh and heavy-handed mother-in-law. Despite the pain of having to leave her young son behind, she looked to the hope of reunion with her spouse and the chance for a better life in Jiu Jin Shan, or the Old Gold Mountain that was San Francisco.

Indeed, the Gold Mountain had bettered the life of a few, particularly the successful speculators in the early stages of the rush. For most, however, the promises of wealth did not deliver, and the Chinese were among the first to be scapegoated and economically marginalized. Harassment and forced segregation were accompanied by laws, such as the Foreign Miner's Tax designed to force "coolies" out of the mineral fields and local ordinances that prohibited Chinese cultural practices like the use of shoulder-slung "yeo-ho" poles. More importantly, a series of laws was passed to make Chinese immigration as difficult as possible, culminating in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which declared all but certain classes of Chinese (i.e. economically beneficial merchants and students) barred from the country, the original "illegal aliens" of federal regulatory code.

Thus, the America that Wong Shee experienced upon arrival was a hot, crowded, and locked barrack, for she found herself booked into the nation's first major immigration detention facility, located on Angel Island just off the coast of San Francisco. Unlike the European immigrants who typically passed through Ellis Island within a few hours, my grandmother remained in detention for nearly six months, enduring multiple interrogations, health inspections, and the long wait for reference checks in a system



where one is deported unless proven eligible. The painstaking process is exemplified in this small excerpt from one of my grandmother's interrogation transcripts:

Q: "You stated before that there were eight houses in your village, and four rows. Now, with the paper clips you have used, you have arranged the village in six rows. Which is correct?"

A: "The first three rows there is only one house in each row. No second house."

Q: Do you mean there are really six rows instead of four?"

A: Yes.

Q: "Why do you have your village different from the way you told us it was arranged when we had the other interpreter?"

A: "I did not arrange them. The other interpreter arranged them himself. I did not know what he meant..." And so on.

Aside from the stressful gauntlet of interrogations, Wong Shee also had to combat prolonged disease in a jail with unsanitary conditions and inadequate medical care. One disease in particular was trachoma, a serious eye infection that had just been classified as a basis for deportation. However, with time running

out, the immigration authorities received a letter, accompanied by a check, which read: "Sir, I respectfully request that hospital treatment be granted in the case of Wong Shee...A deposit of \$300 is hereby made to cover such treatment."

This letter was signed and delivered by Ms. Donaldina Cameron, a Christian minister of the Presbyterian Chinese Mission in San Francisco's Chinatown. In this gracious appeal for mercy on behalf of my grandmother, she was not alone. Along with Ms. Cameron were Ms. Ethel Higgins, Mr. J. H. Laughlin, and other saints from the Presbyterian Mission who, for months, advocated for my grandmother's release from the island. Documents drawn from the National Archives bear witness to the voluminous correspondence between the church and the US immigration authorities, an amazing labor of love that blessed the lives of my ancestors—and so many others.

I share this account with great delight, for in studying my grandmother's ordeal in the Angel Island Immigration Station, I discovered the great works of the Lord in, and through, his people. Discovering God's gracious hand upon my family nearly a century ago, I am filled with gratitude for the men and women who served in his name. As our nation's dark immigration history repeats itself, I pray that we might serve likewise.

*Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in Him.
Psalm 111:2*

For more stories, visit GUM.org/Angelland and download a copy of *Congregational Ministry and Advocacy: The Angel Island Immigration Station Era, 1910-40*, a publication co-edited by Grace Urban Ministries, a congregation-based nonprofit serving children, youth, and families in San Francisco.



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